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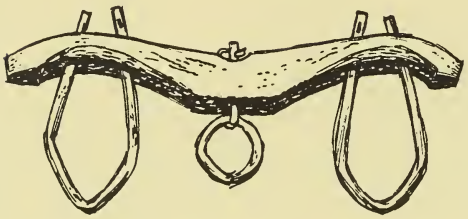
Briggs, Morris H.

More on Abraham Lincoln's Melancholia: an Appreciative Reply

LINCOLN ROOM



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GREAT MINDS GRAPPLING WITH MENTAL DISEASE*

More on Abraham Lincoln's Melancholia

by MORRIS H. BRIGGS

AN APPRECIATIVE REPLY

AS ALWAYS I picked up the May-June LOST AND FOUND with eager anticipation. This was enhanced when I noticed Mr. Hatfield's article on Lincoln's Melancholia since I have dealt in Lincolniana for over twenty years and have handled thousands of manuscripts, letters, pamphlets, broadsides and books by or about Lincoln. I found Mr. Hatfield's article well written, ably documented and superior to 95 per cent of similar studies.

Mr. Hatfield concludes that Lincoln had "a tendency to depression which reached psychopathic proportions in 1835 and again in 1841-42." Milton H. Shutes, M.D. of Oakland, Calif., who has made the most complete and searching study of Lincoln's relations with doctors concluded as follows: "Lincoln was a psycho-neurotic. After all a large share of the world's work and much of its best work has been done by psycho-neurotics and that phase of his character . . . was an indissoluble part of his greatness . . . The balance wheel or stabilizer for any seeming deviation from the normal is common sense . . . this Lincoln's supereminent characteristic would and did lift him up whenever the emergency arose."

In my opinion a most painstaking study of Lincoln's life shows only three periods during which there is any possible chance of making a psychopathic diagnosis: 1—Following the death of Ann Rutledge in the Summer of 1835; 2—From Jan. 1, 1841, when he failed to appear for the marriage ceremony with Mary Todd, to Nov. 4, 1842, the date of his marriage; 3—For a few weeks in 1862, following the death of his favorite son, William.

The Ann Rutledge legend is based so much on hearsay that nothing definite can be concluded regarding it. It has never been proven that Lincoln was in love with her, or that a definite engagement existed. On Dec. 24, 1836 Lincoln wrote a letter to John McNamar, Ann's fiance, addressing him as "Dear Mack." This is a prosy letter dealing with a proposed change in a state road. In a lecture delivered in Springfield, 1866 Herndon makes the following statement: "It has been said that Mr. Lincoln became and was totally insane at that time and place. This is not exactly the truth. The dethronement of his reason was only partial and could alone be detected by his closest friends." I

*Comments received by the editor testify to the interest aroused by the series of articles on "Great Minds Grappling with Mental Disease." The articles are contributed by members of Recovery and express the opinions of the authors for which they bear sole responsibility.—Editor.

may add, "By his closest friends with the 'mostest' imagination."

On Jan. 1, 1841 Lincoln failed to show up for his scheduled marriage with Mary Todd. This is not positive proof of any mental illness. The reluctant bridegroom has been a stock plot situation for several centuries and inspired Vesta Tilley's song "There was I waiting at the church . . . Lord how it did upset me . . ." It did upset Lincoln but let's see how much: Jan. 20 Lincoln writes to J. T. Stuart stating his reliance on Dr. A. G. Henry and that his mind was not composed; also much on politics. Jan. 23 Lincoln made remarks in the Illinois House of Representatives on the continuation of the Illinois and Michigan canal. In regard to the sale of canal scrip he says: "Now we find the representatives of that section of the country are all in favor of the bill. When we propose to protect their interests they say to us, '*Leave us to take care of ourselves. We are willing to run the risk!*' And this is reasonable: we must suppose they are competent to protect their own interests, and it is only fair to let them do it."

It is hard to picture Lincoln as mentally deranged when, three weeks after his broken engagement he is attending the legislature and making such reasonable remarks, which might almost be adopted as a motto for RECOVERY.

On that same day he writes to J. T. Stuart giving a capable political analysis and predicting Stuart's re-election. In the same letter he says: "I am the most miserable man living . . . whether I shall ever be better I cannot tell. I awfully forbode I shall not . . . I must die or be better it seems to me." This indicates depression but certainly not to any psychopathic stage, considering his legislative activities on the same day. Feb. 5 he writes a practical letter to Stuart on politics. On the same day he signed a circular, "Appeal to the People of Illinois" with five other prominent Whigs. Feb. 26 he joined 34 members in a protest against the reorganization of the judiciary. June 4 he wrote a practical letter on politics; on June 12 he signed a receipt in connection with legal business; on June 19 he wrote a long letter to Speed in regard to the Art Fisher murder scare, with carefully reasoned deductions of a Sherlock Holmes nature; on June 25 he signed a statement with Ben'j. Edwards about Henry Wilson, late U. S. Marshal.

On Sept. 27 Lincoln wrote Speed a healthy, newsy letter about his trip to St. Louis, his dental operation, etc.; Oct. 20 he joined three other members of the Whig State Committee in calling a Whig state convention; Oct. 25 he signed an indenture with his father and step-mother.

January, 1842 finds Lincoln giving Speed sage advice regarding nerves and courtship; Feb. 8 he delivered the eulogy on Ben'j. Ferguson and Feb. 22 a long address before the Springfield Washingtonian Temperance Society. It is not necessary to detail further activities in 1842 save that he married Mary Todd on Nov. 4. My most wishful thinking cannot picture Lincoln as mentally deranged when he was serving in the Legislature, taking a prominent part in the deliberations and politics of the Whig party, practicing law, transacting important legal business and making able, set addresses, nor would the voters of his district have elected an incompetent man to represent them in

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LINCOLN'S MELANCHOLIA

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Washington as they did Lincoln in 1846.

It is true that Lincoln suffered a short period of intense depression following the death of his favorite son, William in 1862. Is this surprising taken in connection with his other great responsibilities, duties and trials? The fact that he soon rallied from this gloom and for the balance of the war gained new strength and courage monthly is the best proof of his innate sanity and nervous vitality.

Considering Lincoln's minor symptoms: Melancholy as we all know is temperamental. Luckily we cannot all be Rotary Club optimists all the time. Is it a psychopathic symptom for a young man of 31 to propose marriage to a girl of 16? Lincoln's absent-mindness was a result of his deep, abstract thinking. The absent-minded professor is the butt of the jokester but, so far, has not been in danger of commitment. Just one of the penalties of cerebration. As for minor superstitious beliefs show me one man since the stone age entirely free from them. Lincoln had the same dream before many important events—even on the night before his assassination. Can we blame him for his wonder?

In my opinion Lincoln was not a psycho-neurotic, as I understand the term. Could a person with weak nerves sit up all night with crony carousers, as Lincoln often did, and be the life of the party on mineral water? Could a nervous character survive 24 years of married life with the "hell cat", Mary Lincoln? The final proof is found in Lincoln's growing strength and vitality through the war years, 1861-65, when he was burdened with the greatest responsibilities a man could shoulder and in addition suffered the death of his favorite son and endured the tantrums of his wife.

Lincoln was a genius. From youth he practiced clear thinking and the exact expression of his thought in suitable words. For ten years he gave close study to the political problems of the time: National unity and its preservation under the strain of slavery. The nomination in 1860 was a lucky break but he was ready and prepared to take advantage of it. He preserved the Union and freed the slaves. If Lincoln was psychopathic or neurotic give us some more psychopaths and neurotics like him.

SELP HELP SPIRIT

(*Continued from Page 109*)

and tantrum behavior were reduced to an astonishing degree since the introduction of the paper. This decided improvement in the general conduct of our patient population, of course, may be a sheer coincidence, but it may also be the direct result of the new spirit of self-direction. In a subsequent issue of LOST AND FOUND a final appraisal of the new situation will be offered. For the present, we merely wish to record the observation that lately many a patient who became sulky, obstreperous and resistive was "brought under control" by the gentle intervention of another patient who felt responsible for the behavior of the ward as a group and shivered at the possibility that the "record" might be spoiled.

This is undoubtedly evidence of self-

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